Home Economics—A personal reflection on 30 years of work, friendships and the future

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Introduction

While looking at the credits of the recent Oscar-winning film *The Favourite* [Lanthimos (Director), (2018)] I realised that Home Economics' time has come—among the crew a 'home economist' and a 'home economist assistant' (see Figure 1; IMDB.com, 2019) were listed! Yes, I am one of those sad people who sit through the credits. When all films have similar credits we will know that Home Economics' time has finally arrived and that it has taken its place in the Hollywood circles where it properly belongs.

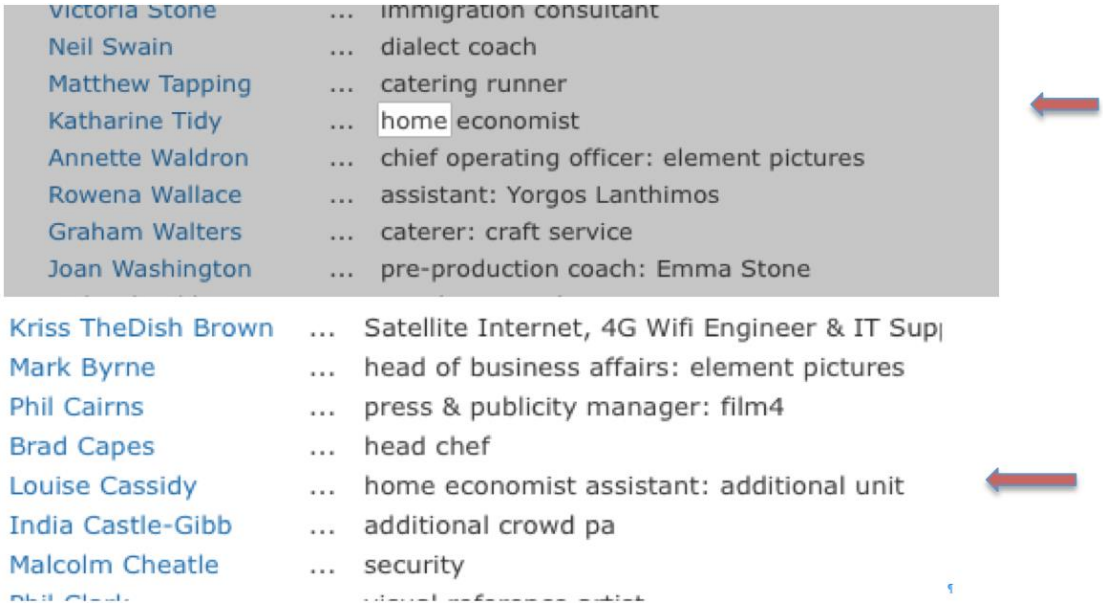

Figure 1. Screen-shot of credits from the film *The Favourite* (Lanthimos, 2018) showing the roles of home economist and assistant home economist advisor (IMDB.com, 2019)

Looking back on 30 years work in food and public health, and about to enter my dotage and formally retire, I realise that I have gotten most hope and inspiration from the area of Home Economics. Amazing groundbreaking work and great people working towards a common vision of an empowered society have inspired me and kept me going in times of doubt and professional despondency. Here, I attempt to set out some reflections as an outsider to Home Economics but one who has been privileged to work closely with many talented home economics professionals.

My introduction to Home Economics

My secondary education did not include Home Economics—I was educated in the days when this was seen as subject for girls (Attar, 1990). Yet home economists were all around me and visible as a profession when I grew up in Ireland. They were in schools but also had a community presence, being employed by the electricity supply board (ESB) for community engagement in rural areas. This latter development was an after-effect of the development of rural electrification schemes in Ireland in the 1920s (Duffy, 2011). These community-based home economists worked mainly with women's groups.

In recent years we have seen many of these cultural barriers challenged and broken down as Home Economics becomes a popular choice for students, irrespective of gender and social norms.

Why Home Economics?

Breadth—no single-bullet approach—and pedagogy

My work focus for over 30 years has been on finding ways to improve people's diets while maintaining a sense of enjoyment of food; all informed by the knowledge that many in our societies do not have the financial, social and cultural capital to access and enjoy food (Caraher & Davison, 2019). There are obvious tensions here, with the public-health world often portraying a lack of enjoyment of food, little understanding of the importance of social eating and an emphasis on denial and delayed gratification. In working with many of my public health colleagues, I have always been struck by how little they know about food, its preparation and the social norms surrounding it. On the other hand, gastronomes often promote enjoyment of food without too much concern for healthy eating, the consequences of unhealthy diets or how some groups can be excluded from social norms and the enjoyment of food. So, in many instances my role has been to create a balancing act between public health and culinary issues (Visser, 1991).

All my professional life I have constantly argued that there is no one magic bullet and have constantly railed against those proposing single solutions—whether they be cooking methods, kitchen gardens or bans on advertising—when what we need is a coordinated approach built on a food-literate population. For me, Home Economics is the profession and has the approach that comes closest to offering a total solution. Clearly Home Economics as a profession needs to work with other groups and to make links between the school and the home but it has a number of advantages in its operation. Like the editorial in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (JAMA), I believe there is a need to re-establish Home Economics in countries where it has been abandoned or has run down and to bolster it in countries where it still exists (Lichtenstein & Ludwig, 2010). This is necessary in the light of a changing social climate around food and ethical consumption, and the links to diet-related non-communicable diseases. The challenges are new and ever evolving but the skills and attitudes that the practice of Home Economics embeds help address these issues.

With apologies to Donna Pendergast and Sue McGregor, who have developed sophisticated models of teaching and learning related to Home Economics, my simple reasons for valuing Home Economics are as follows:

- The hands-on nature and handling of food helps engagement and learning.
- It provides life skills and knowledge, which can be used for the benefit of the individual and the community.
- The approach is grounded in useful life skills that can be drawn on later in life (Worsley, Wang, Yeatman, Byrne, & Wijayaratne, 2016).
- It can help embed a sense of ethics into the wider food system—where our food comes from, who profits from it, etc. (Caraher & Carey, 2010; Caraher & Reynolds, 2005).
- It provides the flexibility to address problems and the means to solve them at both personal and societal levels (Caraher, 2011).
- It captures young people at a key point in their development, giving them knowledge and skills that contribute to their future growth.
- The skills and knowledge are imparted by professionals with an understanding of pedagogy.

Home Economics has always been radical, yet grounded. The earlier advocates of domestic economy were driven by scientific rationalism and a need to free women from the burdens of domestic chores (Stage & Vincenti, 1997; Hayden, 1981). In the 1920s the US feminist Charlotte Perkins Gilman argued that utopia would be where homes had no kitchens but shared collective restaurants (Lane, 1981). This perception has changed with the recognition of the value of food prepared in the home and its contributions to family life and nutritional health. The scientific rationalism of the early days and the development of communal or shared kitchens have given way to issues of inclusiveness and equity around food sourcing and preparation. This does not mean that there are not issues to be addressed—for domestic work little has changed, with women in many developed economies still shouldering the

major burdens for food sourcing and preparation. Increasing involvement in the paid workforce has not been compensated by a reduction in domestic responsibilities and labour (Väänänen et al., 2005).

Its importance in formal education settings

The evidence is now emerging of how Home Economics plays an important part in helping people acquire essential life skills at an important point in their lives. In Japan the curricula is well developed and assured through enabling legislation (Japan Association of Home Economics Education, 2012). Home Economics (kateika) education in Japan enjoys a recognised and reputable place in the curriculum in both elementary (primary) and high school (secondary) education. It has been a subject for grades five and six for Japanese boys and girls since 1947. The Basic Law on Shokuiku was enacted in 2005—this targets all citizens of Japan and defines 'shokuiku' as food education to acquire 'knowledge about food and the ability to make appropriate food choices' (Reiher, 2012). Home Economics as a mandatory school subject is a key mechanism through which the principles of the law can be achieved. Here we see the centrality of Home Economics to improving healthy eating in the population. It is by no means the only approach but it is certainly a key to the development of a healthy society.

In Ireland a government committee recently recommended the teaching of Home Economics to all 12–15 year olds (McCloat & Caraher, 2016). This has been driven by strong professional leadership and lobbying on home economics and the positioning of Home Economics in the curriculum as a key subject supported by trained teachers.

Fordyce-Voorham has developed tools to measure the extent of skills learning in the classroom (Fordyce-Voorham, 2009; Fordyce-Voorham, 2011; Fordyce-Voorham, 2017). Worsley and Burton have begun the process of collecting evidence on the outcomes of Home Economics (Worsley et al., 2016; Burton, Reid, Worsley, & Movondo, 2017). This is key to future developments and funding. Evidence of long terms outputs are required to ensure funding is forthcoming. Home Economics will have to compete against other interest for resources in and out of schools and such research is necessary to ensure funding. Ronto and colleagues have begun to map the important tipping points in the curricula (Ronto, Ball, Pendergast, & Harris, 2016; Ronto, Ball, Pendergast, & Harris, 2017). All these developments, but with an emphasis on the development of outcome indicators, are key to ensuring the future standing and funding of the profession.

Curriculum development in Home Economics can be both personally empowering and politically awakening (Arai & Aoki, 2005). New curricula developments such as that in Victoria have the potential to address issues of individual and global citizenship (Rose, Angliss, Lindberg, & Caraher, 2016; Victorian Curriculum & Assessment Authority, 2016). When my colleagues and I (Lindberg, Wingrove, & Caraher, 2016) wrote a piece on the right to food for the *Victorian Journal of Home Economics* we were impressed with how the issues could be mapped onto the curricula and easily adapted to teaching in the classroom.

Conclusions

I am grateful to being admitted to some of the inner sanctums of Home Economics and I hope this is not the end of the journey. In fact, retirement offers me the opportunity to read in detail and with great focus the work of Vincenti, Shapiro, Hayden and Peacock on those early pioneers (Stage & Vincenti, 1997; Shapiro, 2009; Hayden, 1981; Peacock, 1982). I think there is much to be learned from these early pioneers and how they coped with adversity.

The future is being addressed by a range of key Home Economics thinkers such as Pendergast, McGregor and Turkki (2012). So what remains to be done? What follows below is a list of personal reflections with some caveats and opportunities for the future.

Reflections of what remains to be done

Links with public health

The links with public health nutrition need to be strengthened; developments such as food literacy and the emphasis on cooking skills need to be challenged and fitted within a broader scope of Home Economics (Caraher, 2016). There is a danger that such initiatives can be seen as cheap solutions, limiting the resources and training required. This is equally true of the intrusion of groups such as 'celebrity chefs' into the school setting, offering quick and dirty solutions with few links to curricula and little understanding of pedagogy (Rousseau, 2012). Often, they focus on one aspect such as cooking or food growing, offering this a magic bullet for everything from obesity to family life.

Evidence base

The evidence base for the impact and outcome of Home Economics needs to be strengthened. This is essential to ensure future survival of the profession and to guarantee resources are directed towards recruitment and training. There is currently a lot of research focussed on process and short-term impact; this is all good and important work but we need more on the long-term impact of Home Economics (Worsley et al., 2016). This will enable the profession to present a case for more resources. A future area of research needed is economic evaluation.

Tackling obesity and food sustainability through teaching and learning

Home Economics is well placed to tackle the new twin global issues of obesity and food sustainability. This can be achieved through its teaching efforts resulting in the creation of an aware citizen/consumer. Awareness of the food system and the need to develop teaching and learning around closed loop or circular economic systems are essential for this to be successful (European Commission, 2017). As noted by Bourguignon (2016):

> Unlike the traditional linear economic model based on a 'take-make-consume-throw away' pattern, a circular economy is based on sharing, leasing, reuse, repair, refurbishment and recycling, in an (almost) closed loop, where products and the materials they contain are highly valued. In practice, it implies reducing waste to a minimum. Moving towards a more circular economy could deliver opportunities including reduced pressures on the environment; enhanced security of supply of raw materials; increased competitiveness; innovation; growth and jobs. However, the shift also poses challenges such as financing; key economic enablers; skills; consumer behaviour and business models; and multi-level governance (p.1).

The contribution of and links of Home Economics to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) need to be made clear, with research focussed around showing these contributions (Development Initiatives, 2017). Many of the SDGs have direct relevance to Home Economics—from reductions in the global burden of disease through quality education to addressing hunger.

Home Economics and the home economics profession as trained specialists with an emphasis on curricula and pedagogy need to be continually emphasised; this is the strength of the profession and its uniqueness. Of course, this differs from country to country and will depend on the state of Home Economics in any one country. With no training for Home Economics and with both the education and health sectors facing serious cuts in funding in the UK, there is little hope of a return to a trained Home Economics workforce and hence a need to seek other solutions (Caraher, Seeley, Wu, & Lloyd, 2013).

The links with fabrics and wider design issues become ever clearer to me as time progresses. Long supply chains, changing fashions, disposability and the use of slave labour are issues that clothing and food production share. All of this leads to the need for educated consumer/citizens.

Future proofing

The next generation of home economics thinkers needs to be identified, developed and supported. Perhaps a training scheme could be established so they could spend time on placement to gain and share ideas. A global scheme and funding for PhDs should be considered alongside the development of global joint doctorates, whereby a candidate would spend time at a university in another country as part of their studies.

So onwards and upwards; now that Hollywood has been cracked, global domination is next!

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